

Paul Celan's Speech 'The Meridian' as a Manifest of Art Theory



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Paul Celan's well-known speech 'The Meridian' can be interpreted as a manifest of a complete theory of art. If we depart from the text itself and less from the critical reception, then we may state that poetry, the production of beauty via language, according to Celan, is evidently a lonely and bitter, excruciating activity.

Celan, although he does it in a slightly obscure and esoteric manner, evidently separates the categories of poetry and art from each other. He feels that poetry, an exceptionally powerful way of using language, took place at a much higher level, as the embodiment of (an idea of) beauty standing in itself, cleansed from any external factor, outside any system of reference.

For Paul Celan beauty, in the aesthetical sense of the word – and here we should think of something similar to words spoken by God, some type of sacralised poetic speech – can and should be what is free of every kind of ornament or external reference, and authentic beauty is created in this completely naked state of existence. It is enough if we think of Celan's poem entitled *Stehen* – 'To stand'.

Celan, in his speech 'The Meridian' makes an attempt to destruct the hierarchical systems of reference (first and foremost, those of artistic and aesthetical nature), or at least to ignore and / or by-pass them.

As for the idea of beauty circumscribed in the speech, it seems certain that the text can be connected to Martin Heidegger's paradigmatic essay 'The Origin of the Artwork', even because, as testified by mere philological facts, Celan might have read this work already in 1953, together with the other items of Heidegger's collection of essays 'Off the Beaten Track' (Holzwege).

According to Heidegger, authentic artistic beauty is created without artificial human factors, without the dominion of technology over art. The result of this creation process is not some static, unmoving content of beauty and truth in the artwork, but it is rather 'event-like' (Ereignis), close to the ancient Greek philosophical conception of *Aletheia* does not mean some factual truth, it is not a static fact whose content of truth can simply be checked in the external reality, it is rather an event, truth taking place via something, that earlier was concealed that has now becomes visible. Under no circumstances is this content of truth related to the scientific sense of the word, since the truth of art and the artwork helps man to become more in some sense than earlier, reaching a higher level of existence. This type of truth shows itself, opens up via the artwork – for example, via a poem, the artistic use of language – and reaches the receiver.

Heidegger evidently had a powerful impact on Celan's thinking, as testified by the text of 'The Meridian'. The speech can be read as an implicit conversation with the philosopher. For example, Celan conceives objections against technology and the mechanization of human society, and these notions can be related to another of Heidegger's paradigmatic essays entitled *Die Frage nach der Technik* ('The Question Concerning Technology') that was evidently read by Celan, true, only after the composition of 'The Meridian', around 1968 (K. Lyon 2006).

If we read Celan's text cautiously, then we can see that he speaks about 'automatons' at several loci, in a very negative voice (and at the same time, referring to Georg Büchner's work, since 'The Meridian' was written on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize):

“Please note, ladies and gentlemen: ‘One would like to be a Medusa’s head’ to ... seize the natural as the natural by means of art!

One would like to, by the way, not: I would.

This means going beyond what is human, stepping into a realm which is turned toward the human, but uncanny – the realm where the monkey, the automaton and with them ... oh, art, too, seem to be at home.” (Celan 2003: 42-43)

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“The man whose eyes and mind are occupied with art – I am still with Lenz – forgets about himself. Art makes for distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road.

And poetry? Poetry which, of course, must go to the way of art? Here this would actually mean the road to Medusa’s head and the automaton!” (Celan 2003: 44)

Celan imagines authentic art as being independent of technology. Perhaps he also refers to the neo-avantgard trends of arts spreading in the 1960s (here we may mention Walter Benjamin’s prominent essay about the degradation of art to consumption and the reproducibility of the artwork) (Benjamin: 2006), together with Heidegger’s concepts of existential philosophy ‘Technikpessimismus’ (technological pessimism) and ‘Machenschaft’ (the wish to dominate the world via technology) (Heidegger 2006). That is, the artwork, mainly the artwork existing in / via language should be free / independent of technology that depraves the human being, the ‘Dasein’ and alienates him or her from ‘Being’. Based on it, Celan sees the essence of the truth and beauty of the linguistic artwork in its uniqueness and irreproducibility.

For Paul Celan, poetry (*Dichtung*) is not only the art of placing words beside each other, that is why art (*Kunst*) is used in 'The Meridian' in a very restrictive (and sometimes negative, bound to social systems of reference?) sense. Returning to Heidegger's and Celan's intellectual relationship, although Heidegger himself never strictly separated the notions of *Dichtung* and *Kunst* in his writings, in his post-war essays he seemingly tries to define the artwork as an entity outside the artificial frameworks of human society. According to him, it is also a realistic danger that modern society may degrade language itself – considering Celan's well-known concept of language—concerning mainly of his mother-tongue German violated and abused by the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust—the poet is seemingly afraid of the same, or he even considers this thought as a fact that already came true.

In contrast to Celan's negative opinion about modern(ist) poetry (despite the fact that literary history thinking in epochs considers him as one of the last poets of the paradigm of late modernity), there is a conception according to which 'real' (meaning free of artificial elements) poetry is similar to the concept of the absolute poem conceived by Mallarmé, also mentioned by Gottfried Benn in his last poetical essay 'Problems of the Lyric' ('Probleme der Lyrik') written in 1951 (Benn: 2011). Implicitly debating with Benn, Celan conceives his aversions in 'The Meridian' against the neo-avantgarde trends of literature like concrete and experimental poetry which, according to him, seem to be too artificial:

"Ladies and gentlemen, what I am actually talking about when I speak from this position, in this direction, with these words about the poem, no, about THE poem?"

I am talking about a poem which does not exist!

The absolute poem – it, certainly does not, cannot exist.

But every real poem, even the least ambitious, there is this ineluctable question, this exorbitant claim. "(Celan 2006: 51)

In Georg Büchner's drama referred to by Celan *Danton's Death* the exclamation 'Long live the king!' is pronounced after the king's death. This absurd verbal manifestation is, according to Heidegger's philosophical terminology, a 'counter-word' (Gegenwort), which is not else but an action deriving from man's instinctive desire for freedom. It cannot be excluded that in this certain counter-word Celan also sees the possibility of the realisation of politically motivated poetry – although he himself did not write so many poems of explicit political content, but he produced text that allow political interpretation, for example his poem beginning with the line 'In Eins'.

For Celan, counter-word is the manifestation of 'real' poetry, a manifestation of language that is clear, free of interests and true – that is, beautiful in aesthetic sense of the word, a type of language use that is free of the distorting, rhetorical and artificial characters of language. Celan's 'The Meridian' contains even more radical and provocative elements than Heidegger's philosophy of destruction, intending to re-evaluate the whole history of human thinking. His concept can be related to the pair of notions 'Rede' (speech) and 'Ge-rede' (babble) from among which 'Rede' may also refer to the clear, pure (poetic?) way of language use, while 'Ge-rede' can serve in order to deceive the other and conceal the truth (K. Lyon: 126).

In contrast to Heidegger, Celan accentuates in 'The Meridian' that it is the poem itself that speaks and states itself, not the person of the poet. Although Heidegger states at several loci in his writings that it is not else but the subject language itself that speaks via human beings, according to Celan, the poem is an artwork bound to a certain time and place – referring to Georg Büchner's short story 'Lenz'. Büchner's Lenz lives in an enclosed, very narrow state of existence, in a type of exile, and he always speaks out of this state. This experience of being locked up, being exiled entitles him to pronounce the truth. The poem, being defenceless, exists locked within the dimensions of time and space in the same way and this defencelessness can encourage it to pronounce contents that may not be pronounced via other forms of utterance of language.

Despite the similarities, we may state that Celan's 'The Meridian' conceives a theory of lyric poetry, and more generally, a theory of art that is very different from Heidegger's and Gottfried Benn's. Poetry, as both Heidegger and Benn states, basically has a monological nature. Nevertheless, according to Celan, the poem exists in a state similar to the monologue only at a certain level of its creation process.

Although Heidegger writes about ‘answers given to utterances’ (Entsprechen) at several loci, Celan seems to interpret it in a different way. According to ‘The Meridian’ the poem becomes ‘present’ (Präsens), as if it, as a product of language, became also personalised, individualised, giving some answer itself. The poem is ‘pre-sent’ in the present tense, in the temporal dimension of a certain moment of time, but it speaks out of the present (K. Lyon: 131).

As Celan states, the poem is ‘lonely and underway’, as he conceives it, being ‘en route’, and it is also possible that Celan adjusted Heidegger’s thoughts to his own thinking, even if he did not misinterpret the philosopher’s complex system of thinking. The poem is nothing else but ‘a message in a bottle’ tossed in the ocean, sent to an unknown addressee – as Celan borrows this notion from Osip Mandelstam –, and it either reaches the potential addressee / receiver or not. However, Celan does not only suppose some encounter, but also dialogue, conversation with ‘the Other’, based on reciprocity, realised via the poem. Although the poem exists in a lonely state, it is not to be forgotten that it is permanently ‘en route’, moving towards someone (the receiver?), and this movement, this dynamism is much less accentuated in Heidegger’s writings on language.

That is, Celan evidently refuses the monological nature of language / pronounced words / poems, since the poem, as mentioned above, always has a (potential) addressee and a destination. The poem is not else but a performative (dynamic) type of language use that also has an aesthetical function – if it reaches the undefined addressee, the Other, and it is not only words shouted into nothingness, it becomes an artwork of language. For Celan, poetry is the path of voice in the direction of the “you”, a metaphorical meridian connecting two – or more – subjects.

Art is nothing else but homage to absurdity, a dissonant secession from the monotonous context of weekdays, but at least an attempt to get out of this context. Art is the phenomenon that distances man from his own self, placing him in the context of the unknown, the terrific, the Uncanny (Unheimliche). As if artistic beauty, in Celan’s interpretation, existed in symbiosis, or at least in a complementary relationship with horror. With the horror that we, human beings are forced to control in some way. The horror (Entsetzen) and silence (Verschweigen) also mutually suppose each other’s existence, since the poem carries heavily ponderous contents that are nearly impossible to pronounce – it implies that Celan’s late

poems written in the period around the composition of 'The Meridian' also show a powerful tendency towards the poetics of silence:

"It is true, the poem, the poem today, shows – and this has only indirectly to do with the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis, none of which we should underrate – the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence.

The poem hold its ground, fir you will permit me yet another extreme formulation, the poem holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still-here'." (Celan 2006: 49)

Conceiving the aesthetics of dialogue, according to 'The Meridian' poetry means *Atemwende*, breath-turn, as also referred to by the title of one of the late volumes of poetry by the author. It is the return to a primordial, natural state of existence that existed before art, and in a certain sense it is free of every kind of art, since in Celan's interpretation, art is a constructed, artificial formation, and poetry of artificial nature only deceives us and conceals the truth:

"Poetry is perhaps this: an Atemwende, a turning of your breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way – a way of art – for the sake of just such a turn? And since the strange, the abyss and the Medusa's head, the abyss and the automaton, all seem to lie in the same direction – it is perhaps this turn, this Atemwende, which can sort out the strange from the strange? It is perhaps here, in this one brief moment, that Medusa's head shrivels and the automatons run down? Perhaps, along with the I, estranged and freed here, in this manner, some other thing is also set free?" (Celan 2006: 47)

Perhaps the poem is created from the recognition of some danger, (Bacsó 1996: 71-83) the danger that prevents the lonely artwork that is thrown into the ocean like a message in the bottle from reaching the addressee / the Other, from fulfilling its aesthetical function, from initiating a dialogue. The poem undertakes an endangered mode of existence (Bacsó 1996:

81), even risking to be thrown out of time and space, but at the same time, it finally becomes free. Celan asks the question whether or not the task of the linguistic artwork is to enlarge, to expand the frameworks of art?

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have come to the end – I have come back to the beginning.

Elargissez l’art! This problem confronts us with its old and new uncanniness. I took it to Büchner, and think I found it in his work.

I even had an answer ready, I wanted to encounter, to contradict, with a word against the grain, like Lucile’s.

Enlarge art?

No. On the contrary, take art with you into your innermost narrowness. And set yourself free. I have taken this route, even today, with you. It has been a circle.” (Celan 2006: 51-52)

As ‘The Meridian’ suggests it, we can speak about much more. The goal is rather to create a (poetic) space that is so narrow that implies horror and fear, and within which there is no place for circumlocution.

As for the notion of the author, reading ‘The Meridian’ in its textual reality, less based on the critical reception, we can see that Celan has a very specific concept about the role of the author – although he personifies and individualises the poem, he also claims that the poem is the travelling companion of the poet.

The poem is an entity bound to a given date, and as an utterance it speaks for itself, but it is also able to speak for someone else – interestingly, Celan perhaps does not even question the validity of poetry representing others:

“Perhaps we can say that every poem is marked by its own ‘20th of January’? Perhaps the newness of poems written today is that they try most plainly to be mindful of this kind of date?

But do we not all write from and towards some such date? What else could we claim as our origin?

But the poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. True, it speaks on its own, its very own behalf.

But I think – and this will hardly surprise use – that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the strange – no, I can no longer use this word – on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of altogether other. “ (Celan 2006: 47-48)

The poem that is beautiful in the aesthetical sense of the word, the poem that carries and / or generates aesthetical beauty holds its ground somewhere on its own margin, and shows a strong tendency towards silence – it pronounces only as much as unconditionally necessary. At the same time, the poem behaves as the extension of its author (perhaps similar to the Dasein in Heideggerian sense?), and it is evidently searching for the chance of encounter.

The poem is searching for the Other like a person, an individual, and in the sense of the aesthetics of dialogue it makes the receiver to turn to the Other; that is, to initiate a dialogue, a conversation. The poem becomes the property of the receiver, the receiver's own, and evidently makes him or her think it further:

“The poem becomes – under what conditions – the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them. The poem becomes conversation – often desperate conversation.

Only the space of this conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather into a ‘you’ around the naming and speaking I. But this ‘you’, come about by dint of being named and addressed, brings its otherness into the present. Even in the here and now of the poem – and the poem has only one, unique, momentary present – even in this immediacy and nearness, the otherness gives voice to what is most its own: its time.

Whenever we speak with things in this way we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an 'open' question 'without resolution', a question which points towards open, empty, free spaces – we have ventured far out.

The poem also searches for this place.” (Celan 2006: 50)

Celan's statement according to which there is no absolute poem has a paradoxical nature. The poet may rather conceive a kind of requirement, claim, expectation towards the poem that does not, cannot be completely met with.

The poet / reader who follows the poem as a travelling companion goes on by-passes, detours, and although he or she can also reach someone else, as Celan autobiographically refers to it in 'The Meridian', finally one gets closer to oneself, returning to oneself. 'The Meridian' is circular, geographical formation that connects places that are very far from each other, but compassing the whole Earth it also returns to its own starting point. As we can read in the final paragraphs of 'The Meridian':

“I shall search for the region from which hail Reinhold Lenz and Karl Emil Franzos whom I have met on my way here and in Büchner's work. I am also, since I am again at my point of departure, searching for my own place of origin.

I am looking for all this with my imprecise, because nervous, finger on a map – a child's map, I must admit.

None of these places can be found. They do not exist. But I know where they ought to exist, especially now, and ... I find something else.

Ladies and gentlemen, I find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road in your presence, this road of the impossible.

I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters

I find something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics: I find ... a meridian.” (Celan 2006: 54-55)

If we make an attempt to read Celan’s speech with the technique of close reading, by and large ignoring the constant references to Georg Büchner’s works, we can see that it conceives essentially simple statements – it formulates the aesthetics of dialogue and the aesthetics of the return to ourselves and self-understanding, in some way following the thinking of the philosophers of the German hermeneutical school Wilhelm Dilthey and his 20th century successors Heidegger, and finally his disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer. It is not to be forgotten, as mentioned above, that among other possibilities of interpretation Celan’s speech can be read as in implicit conversation with Heidegger. Furthermore, it is also a well-known philological fact that Gadamer wrote a whole booklet on Celan’s poetry, finding the poem cycle *Atemkristall* – ‘Breath-crystal’ to be the most appropriate example to apply his hermeneutical method of interpretation, also conceiving a dialogical aesthetics of poetry (Gadamer 1993). As we can read it in ‘The Meridian’:

“Is it on such paths that poems take us when we think of them? And are these paths only detours, detours from you to you? But they are, among how many others, the paths on which language becomes voice. They are encounters, paths from a voice to a listening You, natural paths, outlines for existence perhaps, for projecting ourselves into the search for ourselves ... A kind of homecoming.” (Celan 2006: 53)

Finally, it may be a risky, speculative statement, but Celan’s ‘The Meridian’ perhaps does not only conceive the aesthetics of dialogue and self-understanding, an art theory very close to the German hermeneutical tradition, but, since this tendency is strongly present in Celan’s poetic oeuvre, the text also seem to conceive the desire to by-pass media and mediality, the wish to reach immediacy, mainly in the linguistic sense of the term. Basically, the poem is not else but a medium, a vehicle of a message and a message at the same time, but in a certain moment of the encounter the receiver / addressee gets closer and / or returns to himself or herself. The

poem and the receiver nearly become one, and the receiver is allowed, via the (personified?) linguistic artwork, to glance into a privative, enclosed reality within which the dichotomy of mediation and immediacy has already nearly no sense, since this reality exists enclosed in itself, at a certain level in an immediate way, but at least without multiple mediations. Certainly, this immediacy might only be an illusion – an illusion that the receiver can experience only during the short time of the encounter with the poem / the Other, and for a moment he or she can become part of some higher, less mediated, purer and more essential poem-reality / art-reality: the autonomous reality of the artwork.

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